

News

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Reynolds building more playgrounds in Middle East

Former forestry worker hopes to make a difference for Afghan children

By Jesse Ferreras

Iraq, Gaza and the West Bank are known as some of the world's most dangerous places, but for Whistler-based philanthropist Keith Reynolds, they present an opportunity to make a positive difference.

Reynolds, a former forestry worker, founded Playground Builders in 2006. It's a Whistler-based organization that forms partnerships with non-governmental organizations to establish children's playgrounds in conflict zones. The organization has established 20 playgrounds to date in places such as Baghdad, Jenin and Ramallah and is now looking to establish another in Afghanistan.

Reynolds and two others left for the Middle East this week to check on existing playgrounds and survey for new ones — to be built with funds raised earlier this year in Whistler. When they return they'll be raising more money for the 10 new playgrounds they've committed to build.

Each playground is built using local workers, in an effort to reduce unemployment and inject money into the region.

The genesis of Playground Builders was about 20 years ago when Reynolds was backpacking in Europe and suddenly had an urge to see the Middle East.

"I ended up just chasing the sunshine and basically said to my friends, if it rains tomorrow, let's fly to Tel Aviv," he said. "That was from Crete and it was raining, and then we ended up in Tel Aviv, and then Jerusalem."

Curious about the peace process, Reynolds decided to make a tour of the West Bank and soon saw the effects that years of conflict have reaped on the territory, which has long been marked by fighting between Israel and its neighbours.

"I just thought there was a chance we could make a difference for the future, and that was to build some playgrounds," he said.

Reynolds established the first three playgrounds out of his own pocket two years ago in three locations throughout the West Bank. Those locations included Jenin, a city where a refugee camp was the site of a fierce 12-day battle in 2002 between soldiers with the Israel Defence Forces and Palestinian guerrilla fighters.

Since then playgrounds have been established all over the Middle East, in places such as North Gaza and most recently in the northeast area of Baghdad, Iraq's capital city, where a playground opened in March.

Reynolds, who visited Iraq in 2003 shortly after Saddam Hussein was captured, remembers having a tough time finding his way to the war-torn country.

He was traveling alone in Jenin when he heard about Saddam's capture and decided to go to Iraq. He was booked on one of the first flights from Amman, Jordan to Baghdad, but the flight was cancelled after a transport plane had been shot down.

Reynolds soon encountered a former member of Saddam's Ba'ath Party who was moving people from Baghdad to Amman in an American-made SUV. He paid him \$200 to drive him to Baghdad and he got there after a non-stop 11-hour trip.

"We actually carried gasoline with us," Reynolds said. "We stopped just inside the Iraqi border, filled up gas and we just motored all the way."

Once there he toured the Sunni Triangle, a region in the country's northwest area, and was a guest of American forces in Tikrit, where he toured Saddam's palace. Outside the palace he witnessed a country marked by tanks, gunfire and mortar blasts.

"For almost 30 years, (Iraq has) either been at war or under sanctions," Reynolds said. "I talked to people in the street just to see the human damage, and the carnage, and the little ones, who again, have been neglected."

Since being built, the Baghdad playground has faced a number of problems. It opened on March 10 but since then it has borne witness to sectarian violence and bombings by Coalition forces that have helped put its neighbourhood under curfew. The final piece was only installed in the past week.

"For the builders there, they've been struggling with power shortages, electricity shortages and curfew," Reynolds said.

Despite the violence that has engulfed these countries, Reynolds is committed to providing hope through the construction of playgrounds. Two park benches have been installed at the Baghdad playground in an effort to create some public space.

"In war and war economies or crisis areas, there are no more gathering places," he said. "It becomes a gathering place for parents to talk about issues or their children or community issues."

The playgrounds, meanwhile, each with two swingsets, two teeter-totters and a slide, are a way to lift community spirits.

"It's creating public employment, it's creating dignity, it's creating pride that the parents can see their children having fun," Reynolds said.

Afghanistan, his next project, is proving difficult thus far. All materials for the prospective playground have to be imported and the workforce in that country, he said, isn't accustomed to building playgrounds.

At the moment he's looking to work with an NGO to establish two playgrounds outside of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and possibly another in Herat province in the country's northwest region.

Mike Varrin, a director of Playground Builders and general manager of bars for Whistler-Blackcomb, is accompanying Reynolds and another volunteer on the current trip to the Middle East.

A longtime friend of Reynolds's, Varrin is getting involved with the project out of a desire to give less fortunate kids a chance to have fun.

"Living in Whistler, which is just this giant playground, I feel very fortunate to have lived here as long as I have, and just to play as much as I do," Varrin said. "Just to give some of that back to someone who deserves it is really the motivation for it."

Reynolds said Varrin will help him survey existing playgrounds and tour possible sites for new ones. They'll be touring Jerusalem and the West Bank before Varrin returns home. Reynolds, meanwhile, will stay on and visit Gaza before going on to Afghanistan, providing he obtain a visa.